# Beginning Anew

**By Thich Nhat Hanh**



Dear friends, today is the 10th of May, 1998. We are in the Upper Hamlet, and we are in the Spring Retreat. Today is *Vesak*, the day of the nativity of the Buddha. The life of the Buddha was supported by a kind of aspiration, a kind of desire, a kind of energy, that is to help, to help reduce the amount of suffering in the world, to bring about transformation and healing, to bring joy. That energy is important, that aspiration is important. The vitality of the life of the Buddha is the energy of compassion, the energy of understanding that can make the Buddha alive that can help him to continue the teaching so that many people will be able to liberate themselves. To be born means to begin anew, and all of us want to begin anew.

When we know how to begin anew we get a lot more energy, joy and aspiration that can help us transform what is negative in us, and help us have more joy, more capacity to transform the situation around us. To be born is a form of beginning anew. And that is why we should be able to be born as a new being at every moment of our lives. There are people who may say, "I am too old to begin again." That is because they have not seen the true nature of life, of the practice of Beginning Anew. We can practice Beginning Anew at any moment of our lives. To be born is to begin anew. When you are three years old you can begin anew, and when you are sixty years old you can still begin anew, and when you are about to die, that is still time to begin anew. We need to practice looking a little bit more deeply in order to see that Beginning Anew is possible at any time of our daily lives, at any age.

Suppose a cloud is floating in the sky, and is about to die, to become rain. The cloud could be caught in anger, in fear: "Why does this happen to me? Why do I have to die? Why can't I continue to be a cloud floating in the sky? So anger and fear may come to the cloud and make the cloud very unhappy; but if the cloud is intelligent enough, if the cloud knows how to look deeply into its true nature, then it can practice Beginning Anew. Tonight is also an opportunity to be reborn, and that is a preparation. We should not be caught in any form, because to be a cloud floating in the sky is wonderful, but to be the rain falling on the mountain or the river, on the trees and on the grass is also a wonderful thing. Even excitement is possible, hope is possible, joy is possible when dying. We know that there are people who are capable of dying in a very peaceful and happy way. I have seen people who die with contentment, with happiness, with a sense of fulfillment, and who do not regard their dying as the end of something, of their life. They have been able to look deeply into the nature of life, and they are emancipated from the notions of being and non-being. There are people who sit on the threshold of their house, and look at the children playing in the morning sunshine in the front yard, and watch their grandchildren playing happily. And when they look like that, they suddenly become their grandchildren. They see themselves as playing in the morning sunshine in the grass. They see their continuation in their grandchildren. They know that they have done everything that they could do in order for these children to be happy, to be well-prepared in order to enter life. They are ready to begin anew. They have already begun anew, and they can see themselves in new forms of life.

Of course, during their lifetimes they have made some mistakes. Because we are human beings, we cannot avoid making mistakes. We might have caused someone else to suffer, we might have offended our beloved ones, and we feel regret. But it is always possible for us to begin anew, and to transform all these kinds of mistakes. Without making mistakes there is no way to learn, in order to be a better person, to learn how to be tolerant, to be compassionate, to be loving, to be accepting. That is why mistakes play a role in our training, in our learning, and we should not get caught in the prison of culpability just because we have made some mistakes in our life.

If you can learn from your mistakes, then you have already transformed the garbage into a flower, for your own

joy, for the joy of your ancestors, for the joy of the future generations, and also for the joy of the person who was the victim of your ignorance and your lack of skillfulness. Very often we have done that out of our un-skillfulness, not because we wanted to harm that person, or we wanted to destroy the person, or because we wanted him or her to suffer. We were unskillful, that is all. I always like to think of our behavior in terms of it being more or less skillful, rather than in terms of good and evil. If you are skillful, you can avoid making yourself suffer, and making the other person suffer. If there is something you want to tell the other person, then yes, you have to tell it, but there is a way to tell it and make the other person suffer, and make you suffer. But there are other ways to say it that would not make the other person suffer, and yourself suffer also. So the problem is not whether to tell or not to tell what you have in your heart, the problem is how to tell it so that suffering will not be there. That is why this is a matter of art, and of our practice also.

Your goodwill is not enough for the practice—you have to be artful in your practice. Walking, eating, breathing, talking, working, you should learn the art of mindful living, because if you are a good artist, you will be able to create a lot of happiness and joy around you and inside of you; but if you have only your goodwill, if you count only on your goodwill, that will not be enough, because out of goodwill we may cause a lot of suffering. As a father, as a mother, as a daughter, as a son, we may be filled with goodwill, we may be motivated by the desire to make the other person happy, but out of our clumsiness we make them unhappy. That is why mindful living is an art, and each of us has to train himself or herself to be an artist. Instead of saying to someone, "You are right or wrong," which is a very difficult thing to hear, you might say , "You are more skillful or less skillful." In our Five Contemplations before eating we say that we want to be aware of our unskillful states of mind, instead of saying that we want to be aware of our evil states of mind. Unskillful—if you are angry or if you are jealous, that is only un-skillfulness. Because we are unskillful, anger and jealousy become mental formations. You know that that deed, that sentence, if we can do it or if we can pronounce it with art, it will help the other person, and it will help us.

All of us have to learn the art of living. And if you have the chance to meet with parents, friends and teachers who are skillful in the art of mindful living, then you can learn, and you will be able to make many people around you happy, and therefore you make yourself happy. But if you are not lucky, you cannot learn that art from your parents or from your brothers and sisters, or your friends, and you continue to be unskillful, and you make the people around you unhappy, and yourself unhappy. If we know how to look at things from that angle, we suffer much less already. That person who has caused me a lot of suffering just because he is unskillful, he didn’t know what he said, he didn’t know what he did. And we know our parents are full of love for us, they only want our happiness, but out of their un-skillfulness they make us suffer so much. And we also have our love for our parents, we don’t want them to suffer, but our way of acting or reacting can make them suffer terribly. So it is not the issue of goodwill here, it is the issue of art.

Walking meditation is an art. You can make steps that create stability and joy, and that will nourish you every moment, but only if you have goodwill. "I will practice walking meditation!" And you become very stiff and very serious, you don’t enjoy every step you make. You have to allow yourself to be natural, to be relaxed. You have to learn how to allow yourself to breathe naturally, allow your face to be relaxed, allow your feet to walk naturally; you know how to coordinate your steps with your breath, and allow nature to welcome you. Just a few steps can already introduce you to the Pure Land of the Buddha. You walk as an artist. When other people see you walking, they are inspired: "How wonderful! How beautifully that person walks! I can see the stability, the serenity, the joy." And they will be inspired, and they will learn the practice. It is not by writing letters or giving a sermon that we can help another person get in touch with the Dharma. Maybe because of our willingness to teach him, to share with him our practice, that person will want to get away from us. So there must be an art in order to share the Dharma and the spiritual life with the person we love.

In Asia, Buddhism is the practice of whole families. Everyone in the family is supposed to be a Buddhist. But in the West it happens that just one member of the family is fond of practicing mindfulness, but the other members of the family don’t know anything about it and even find the practice very queer. And if you are not artful in your practice, you alienate yourself from the rest of the family. So you have to learn to practice in such a way that your practice will inspire the people around you. We have to practice not being caught by the form of the practice. You can practice in such a way that people don’t see you practice. You can walk in such a way that people see that you are very natural, very relaxed, very joyful. There are those people who practice walking meditation that turn you off: it’s too serious, too tight, not natural at all. And if you practice Buddhism in such a way you will not help the people in your family. Practice so that each day you become calmer, smiling more, and more open. Then one day your companion will be inspired to ask, "How can you do it? In such a situation, how can you still smile? What is your secret?" That is the time when you can share your practice—but not before. You cannot impose your practice

on him or on her. This is an art.

(Bell)

We know that the core of the Buddha's teaching is non-self. This is something people find very hard to accept, because everyone believes that there is a self, and you are yourself, you are not the other person. But with the practice of looking deeply, we see things differently. You see yourself as a person, a human being; you say that you are not a tree, you are not a squirrel, and you are not a frog. You are not the other person. That is because we have not looked deeply into our true nature. If we do, we will see that we are at the same time a tree. It is not only in our past lives that we have been a tree or a rock or a cloud, but even in this life, in this very moment, you continue to be a tree, you continue to be a rock, you continue to be a cloud. In fact you cannot take the tree out of you, you cannot take the cloud out of you, you cannot take the rock out of you., because if you could, you would no longer be there as yourself. In the Jataka stories it is said that in past lives the Buddha had been a squirrel, a bird, deer, an elephant, a tree. It's very poetic, but it does not mean that when the Buddha was a human person living in the city of Sravasti, he was no longer a tree, a rock, a deer. He continued to be all of these. So when I look into myself, I see I still am a cloud, not only during a past life, but right now.

There is a lady who wrote a poem about her husband, who is a student of mine. That student of mine is very fond of my teaching. And she said, "My husband has a mistress, and his mistress is an old man who sometimes dreams of being a cloud." I don't think that description of me is correct, because I am not dreaming of being a cloud—I am a cloud. At this very moment you could not take the cloud out of me; if you took the cloud out, I would collapse straight away. You cannot take the tree out of me; if you did, I would collapse. So looking deeply into our true nature, we see that what we call self if made only of non-self elements. This is a very important practice, and it does not seem as difficult as we may imagine. So you are the son, but you are not only the son, you are the father. If you take the father out of you, you collapse. You are the continuation of your father, of your mother, of your ancestors. That is non-self. Son is made of father, and father is made of son, and so on. And the practice is that every day we have the opportunity to look at things in such a way--otherwise we live in a very shallow way, and we don't get to the heart of life. A young man may say, "I hate my father. I don't want to have anything to do with my father." He is very sincere, because every time he thinks of his father, anger is coming up. It's very unpleasant, so he wants to separate himself from his father, and he is determined to do so. But how could such a thing be possible? How can you take your father out of you? The hard fact is that you are your father. It's better to reconcile with your father within. There is no other way out. You can behave like that when you believe in the reality of self, but the moment that you see the true nature of self, you can no longer behave like that. You know that the only way is to accept, to reconcile and to transform. You know that it is the discrimination; it is the ignorance in you, which has caused the suffering.

The other day Sister Phuoc Nghiem practiced Touching the Earth alone in the meditation hall to pray for her grandmother. She had also asked all her big sisters and younger sisters to gather in order in order to pray and to send energies to her grandmother who had passed away, but she also practiced alone, touching the earth. During the first year of practicing here she thought very often that one day one dear member of her family might pass away, and how she would deal with that. And every time in Plum Village that there was a ceremony of prayer for someone who passed away, that thought would reoccur: "How shall I deal with the situation when I hear that a member of my family has passed away?" Then one day she heard that the baby that her sister had given birth to had passed away just a few hours after birth, and her sister suffered quite a lot. Her sister lives in Germany. And when she talked to her, Sister Phuoc Nghiem noticed the suffering, the instability, and the despair in the voice of her sister. Because her sister suffered so much, Sister Phuoc Nghiem also suffered, and she tried to practice in order to suffer less, because she knew that if she did not suffer less, she would not be able to help her sister. She telephoned her mother in Vietnam, and her mother said, "It was better like that than to raise the child for two or three years and then have him die later, when the suffering would be much more intense. Because after two or three years of raising a child, attachment will be much deeper, and of course the suffering would be much greater. So, you consider it to be like the squash in the garden…there are flowers that wither and do not become a squash, and that is true with humans. There are children that we can keep, and there are children that we cannot keep, right from the beginning. That is something that happens."

When Sister Phuoc Nghiem talked to me, I told her the story about my brother. Before I came, my mother was pregnant, and she miscarried. Sometimes I asked whether that was my brother or that was me, who did not want to come out, because I judged that the time was not appropriate for me to come out. That was also a meditation on self and non-self. When I said, "Was that my brother or was that me?" I was using the words "brother" and "me"

as two separate entities. But if we look deeply into it, we see that my brother is me, and I am my brother, so you can see the reality of not-one, not-two in it. When we look at the father and the son, and we see the non-dualistic reality, the inter-being of the two, we can see the same thing with our brother and ourselves. I cannot take my brother out of me, my brother cannot take me out of himself, so my brother and I inter-are. We cannot say that we are one or we are two, because one and two are concepts. "The same" is a concept, "the different" is another concept, and reality transcends all concepts. So it is applied with father and son, younger brother and big brother, and we can see a stream of life.

When Sister Phuoc Nghiem practiced Touching the Earth for her grandmother, she found out many interesting things. Before doing so she was practicing walking meditation on Sunset Boulevard of the Upper Hamlet, and she saw the vineyard, the wheat fields, and she was walking and seeing that her grandmother was walking with her. She remembered that when she was a little girl her grandmother used to lullaby her with Vietnamese lullabies. During her first and second years as a nun in Plum Village, she would often think of the days she would go back to Vietnam and she would walk like that with her grandmother, whom she loved so much. She had good times with her grandmother. She said that now she doesn’t have to wait anymore—her grandmother has come here and is doing walking meditation with her, and that her grandmother would be happy to see the fields of wheat, because they look very much like the rice fields in Vietnam. While she practiced Touching the Earth she saw that her grandmother also practiced Touching the Earth before, but this is the first time that she had practiced Touching the Earth in the Plum Village way. In the Plum Village style you stay in the position of Touching the Earth for a long time, at least three in-breaths and three out-breaths, and she found it wonderful that her grandmother was practicing Touching the Earth in the Plum Village style with her. She looked at her hand and said, "This is my hand, but this is also my mother’s hand, and this is my grandmother’s hand..." So she could see the presence of her grandmother in her left hand, and then she held her left hand with her right hand, and she felt very clearly that she was holding the hand of her grandmother. And this was something very real, and not imagination. And she cried because of that happiness. She no longer felt that she was separated from her grandmother, her grandmother is within her and is practicing with her, and any smile she makes is to liberate herself and to liberate her grandmother at the same time. So that is a good practice: you can see the nature of inter-being between you and your grandmother. It’s like when I look into myself and I see the nature of inter-being between the cloud and myself. The cloud and I cannot be taken away from each other.

What you did in the past out of your un-skillfulness is like that. If in the past you did something unskillful, it is because of many conditions: you did not have a father that could help you at that moment; you did not have a mother or a teacher to help you in that moment to be more skillful than you were; and the seed of that lack of skillfulness has been transmitted to you by many generations. You were not able to recognize that seed in you; you made a mistake; you did unskillful things. It means that all of your ancestors did it together with you at that moment. Looking from the insight of non-self, you see that everyone was doing the unskillful thing that you did, with you. You have to see it, and the essential is that you are free from the notion of self. It is clear that when you are able to breathe in mindfully and smile, all generations of ancestors in you are smiling at the same time. Not only your ancestors, but the future generations in you are able to smile with you; so every time you made a mistake, every time you did an unskillful thing, everyone was doing it with you. Now that you have come in touch with the Dharma, you realize that that was an unskillful thing to do, and you are motivated by the desire that you will never do it again.

I said before that if we have not made any mistakes, there is no way for us to learn. So that is why to look deeply, and to see the nature of the act, the nature of inter-being of the act in the light of non-self, we see that that is a kind of act, that is a kind of speech that has created suffering. That moment when you see it, when you recognize it, that is enlightenment, because enlightenment is always enlightenment of something, or about something. The moment when you see that this is the lack of skillfulness on your part and on the part of many ancestors who have transmitted the seed to you, then that is already enlightenment, that is already meditation, that is already deep looking. And out of that enlightenment you are motivated by a desire that you would not like to do that again. So that desire, that aspiration is a strong energy, a strong energy that can make you alive, that can help you to protect yourself, to protect all the future generations within you, and that insight is very liberating. And if you know that you are not going to do the same thing again, you are already free, and your ancestors are also free, and there is no need to be caught in your feeling of culpability.

(bell)

The Buddhist teaching on Beginning Anew is very clear: "The un-skillfulness comes from our mind, and the un-

skillfulness can be transformed by our mind. If the transformation happens in your consciousness, then the unskillfulness will disappear as a reality in the manifested world. The mind is like a painter." This is the Buddha’s teaching, that the mind is a painter. The painter can paint anything, and the painter can erase everything. So if in the past you have painted something you don’t like, and if you are determined not to paint it again, then you erase all of that. It depends on your mind, your consciousness. If there is light, there is enlightenment in your consciousness; there is a strong determination, the awareness that "This is something negative, this is something harmful, this something not beneficial, and I am determined not to allow it to happen again," and then the mind is transformed. And when the mind is transformed, liberation is already there for you and all your ancestors, and if you are still caught in that feeling of culpability, that is because you have not done the work of Beginning Anew, it means that you have not practiced looking deeply into your clumsiness, your lack of skillfulness. If you had, then you would see that many conditions had come together for that action or that sentence to become possible. And now, with your enlightenment, with your determination, you will never allow these conditions to come together again in order to repeat the same thing. Your awareness, your enlightenment, is the element that will prevent these conditions coming together again.

If your practice of Beginning Anew has not been successful, that is because your capacity of looking deeply into the reality of the situation is not deep enough, because there has not been any transformation within your consciousness, or within the consciousness of your partner, the other person. It’s not because the method isn’t effective, it’s because you have not really practiced it. The practice of Beginning Anew is to transform your mind deeply, and in order to get a transformation; you have to look very deeply, in the light of inter-being. I always tell my students that whatever you do, I do it with you, so please be careful. That is true; and whatever I do, you do it with me. If I break the precepts, if I behave in an irresponsible way, all my students will bear all the fruit that is very clear. So I cannot afford to make you suffer. That is a very strong energy that keeps me in the good practice, because I know very well that if I am not mindful, if I am not practicing correctly, all my students, my disciples will suffer. The same thing is true with my disciples: if they don’t practice mindful manners, if they don’t practice the precepts, if they make each other suffer, I suffer; I will have to shoulder everything, because we inter-are. We cannot be separated. The teacher cannot be a teacher without students, and the students cannot be students without a teacher.

So if Beginning Anew has not brought the wanted result, it is because you have not done it at the base. You might have done it with talking back and forth, but you have not seen deeply that you and the other person inter-are. If you have seen that, the result will come right away. When I was in Italy, we held a retreat not far from Rome and we went to a field of olive trees. I noticed that the olive trees were growing in groups of three or four, and I was surprised. But I found out that there had been a very cold year and all the olive trees had died, and for that reason they had cut all the trees at the level of the ground, and then they brought in more soil, and the next year the young olive trees came up. From one olive tree, there were now two or three or four olive trees. And I gave a Dharma talk to the children in Italy, and I said that you and your brother and your sister, you think that you are three, but in fact, if you touch your roots deeply you will see that you are one. So to get angry with your sister or your brother is wrong; instead, you have to help him or her, because to help him or her is to help yourself. So that is the way I taught "non-self" to the children, and they understood right away.

There was a little girl who did not like her brother, and since she was watching a lot of television, she had the tendency to eliminate what she didn’t like. And one day she said, "Why don’t we eliminate younger brother?" It was very dangerous. You don’t like your young brother, you just wish your young brother would vanish, and you imagine you can do it easily, like using a remote control. But after the Dharma talk I gave to her, and the teaching given by some brothers and sisters who accompanied me, the girl went home and was transformed. And one day she told her brother, "Brother, I’m here for you. What do you need? I’ll do it for you." So wisdom and enlightenment are possible even with very young children. If you touch the ground of being deeply, you will find the nature of inter-being, and you will feel it’s much better to help the other person, than to be angry at him and to punish him, because when you punish him you punish yourself somehow. Imagine a father and son always trying to punish each other: both of them suffer, and continue to suffer.

During the Vietnam War there was an American soldier who got very angry because most of the soldiers in his unit got killed in an ambush by Vietnamese guerrillas; that happened in a village in the countryside, so out of his rage he wanted to retaliate. He wanted to kill a number of people who belonged to that village. So he took out a bag of sandwiches, and he mixed explosives into the sandwiches and left them at the entrance to the village. He saw children coming out and happily taking the sandwiches, thinking that someone had left these delicious sandwiches, and they ate together, enjoying a lot. And just half an hour later he saw them begin to show signs of suffering.

Their father and their mother and sister came, and tried to help, to give them massage and medicine, but the American soldier who had hidden himself not far from there, knew very well there was no way to save these children, and that they would die. He knew that even if they had a car to transport these children to the hospital it would be too late. Out of anger he had done things like that. If anger is strong in us, we are capable of doing anything, even the cruelest things.

When he went back to America he suffered because of that: that scene appeared to him in his dreams, and he could never forget it. Any time during the day if he found himself alone in a room with children, he could not stay, and had to run out of the room right away. He could not talk about that to anyone except to his mother, who said, "Well, that was the war, and in a war you cannot prevent these things happening." But that did not help him, until he came to a retreat organized by Plum Village in North America. During many days he was not able to tell people of his story. It was a very difficult retreat. We sat in circles of five or six people, and invited people to speak out about their suffering, but there were those who sat there unable to open their mouths. There were war veterans who were deeply wounded inside, and fear and despair were still there. When we did walking meditation I saw one or two walking far behind, at least twenty meters behind us. I did not understand why they did not join us, but walked far away like that. When someone inquired, they learned that these ex-soldiers were afraid of being ambushed. So they walked far behind so that if something happened they would have enough space to run away. And one war veteran set up a tent in the jungle, and in order to appease his fear, he set up booby traps around his tent. That happened in the retreat in North America…he always had the guerrillas around him, and in him, ready to kill him at any time. Finally that American Vietnam War veteran was able to tell us the story of the explosives put into the sandwiches. It was very good for him to be able to tell it, especially in front of the Vietnamese people, his former enemies. I gave him a prescription. I had a private consultation with him, and I said, "Now look, you killed five children, yes. And that is not a good thing to do, yes. But don't you know that many children are dying in this very moment, everywhere, even in America, because of lack of medicine, of food? Do you know that 40,000 children die every day in the world, just because of the lack of medicine and food? And you are alive you are solid physically. Why don't you use your life to help the children who are dying in this moment? Why get caught in the five children who have died in the past? There are many ways…if you want, I will tell you how to save five children today. There are children who need only one table of medicine to be saved, and you can be the one who brings that tablet of medicine to him or to her. If you practice like that every day, the children who died because of the explosives will smile in you, because these five children have participated in your work of saving many children who are dying in this very moment."

So, the door was opened, so that the man was longer trapped in the feeling of culpability. That is the *amrita*, the ambrosia of compassion, of wisdom, offered by the Buddha: there is always a way out. So that war veteran has practiced and has been able to help many other children in the world. He has gone back to Vietnam, has done the work of reconciliation, and the five children who died have begun to smile in him and to become one with him. In the beginning it was a distressing image, but now the five children have become alive, have become the energy helping him to live with compassion, with understanding. The garbage can be transformed into flowers if we know how to do it.

If you are a person who has been sexually abused as a child, and if you have suffered, you can also practice in order to heal your wound, in very much the same way. What you should do is described very clearly in the Five Mindfulness Trainings: "I vow to protect the integrity, the safety of families, couples. I vow to do my best to protect children from sexual abuse." That is something you can do. And if you take the vow in front of the Sangha, the Buddha, and the Dharma, to devote your life to protecting children who are now being threatened in this very moment, your childhood wound will be healed. You'll get a lot of joy, and your suffering will be turned into a flower. If you had not suffered like that you would not be a protector of children, as you are today. So you look back at your suffering and you are thankful to it, thankful that it happened, so that you could become a bodhisattva protecting children. That is the wonderful thing about the Dharma: the Dharma always offers a way out, provided that you know how to look deeply into the nature of your suffering. There's no need to cling to that suffering. If you are still caught, that means you have not practiced looking deeply, you have not given rise to the energy of compassion in yourself, so that you become an instrument of the Dharma, an instrument of the Buddha.

(bell)

If you have offended someone, if you have made someone suffer, that wound is still in you. And if you want the wound to heal, you can practice like this: you sit quietly and you look into the nature of the deed, or the speech you have made in the past. You say, "I am sorry, I did it out of clumsiness, out of a lack of understanding; I was

ignorant, no-one had shown me. I have made you suffer, my dear, and I have made myself suffer a lot also, so I promise that I'll never do it again. And I do it for myself, for you, and for many generations to come." If you can do it, you will see that the person in you will smile. Usually we think that the past is already gone, you cannot go back to the past and repair things in the past, but that is not true. There is always a way out, according to the Dharma, because according to the Dharma the past is there in the form of the present, because the wound is still there. So touch your wound deeply, and say, "This is a product of a lack of wisdom, compassion, the product of ignorance. I can see its effect on me, on the world and on the other person, and I am motivated by the desire not to allow it to happen again." That kind of wisdom, that kind of light, that kind of determination, that kind of love, becomes a very powerful source of energy that will prevent conditions coming together in order for the same thing to happen again. Just sit down and breathe quietly, and tell him or her that you are sorry and that you will not do it again, and you do it for you, for him, for her, and you will see him or her smiling to you, and you are free. And your freedom is his freedom; your freedom is the freedom of all your ancestors, your children and their children. Everything comes from the mind. If the mind is transformed, everything will transform. That is the teaching of Beginning Anew in Buddhism.

In the practice we always go back to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, not as notions but as reality. The Sangha is something that you can touch, that you can live with every day. The Dharma also, the living Dharma. The living Dharma is something you can produce with every step you make, with every breath you take, with every minute of sitting, of working. The Buddha said, let us take refuge only in what is solid. There is an island within, you should go back to the island of mindfulness, and touch the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha in it, and you should not rely on things that are impermanent, that can collapse at any time. If you have a strong conviction in the Dharma, there is no reason for you to be afraid of anything. In order to have confidence in the Dharma, you have to be successful in the practice. There is anger, there is jealousy, there is confusion, and because you have been offered the Dharma to practice, you have had a chance to transform these afflictions in the past, and because of that your faith, your confidence in the Dharma has increased a lot. That is for your benefit and the benefit of all of us. Therefore, taking refuge in the Dharma is very important. You will no longer be afraid. If you take refuge in the Dharma, you know that whatever happens to you, you will be able to manage in order to preserve your peace, your stability. The Buddha said take refuge in the Dharma and not anything else. Of course, as a practitioner you need a teacher, you need a Dharma brother, you need a Dharma sister. But what makes the teacher a teacher is the Dharma. What makes a Dharma brother a Dharma brother is the Dharma. So you rely on the substance of Dharma, and not just the physical presence of that person you call teacher, or brother or sister. If he is your brother in the Dharma, it is because he has the Dharma in him. If he is your Dharma teacher, it is because the Dharma inhabits him. So if you learn how to take refuge in the Dharma, then even if the teacher is no longer there, the Dharma brother is no longer there, you are still solid, you will not collapse, because it is the Dharma that you take refuge in, and not something else.

Suppose you have had the experience of a panic attack, or a depression; if you have adopted some practice in order to survive that panic attack, that depression, you know that you have the Dharma in yourself. Next time it comes I can smile to it, because I know how to deal with a storm. So to rely on the dharma, and not to rely on anything else, is the recommendation made by the Buddha. There are people who ask how they can survive without a house, a bank account, or this person or that person, but if you have confidence within yourself, wherever you go you can create conditions to be alive, in such a way that you can contribute to the well-being of the world. There was a lady who was a refugee among the boat people who arrived on the coast of Thailand, and she was robbed of all the gold that she had brought. Because the sea pirates took everything from her—all her belongings, the money, the jewels—she was only able to keep one tiny piece of gold in her mouth. Upon arrival she asked, "How can I survive with only this much gold?" Next to her there was a gentleman who had been robbed of everything except his shorts—his shirt was taken, his trousers, everything—and he was laughing and laughing. He said, "How can I survive with only these shorts?" He was very happy because he had confidence in himself. To be alive, that was largely enough for him; he did not need anything else. So we should cultivate a kind of non-fear: if we practice the Dharma, and we can count on the Dharma, then there is no reason why we should be afraid of anything, even if we know that life is impermanent. We can lose a beloved one in the future, and the whole world is our refuge.

There are still many other questions which have not been answered. One more question is about the feeling of not being good enough: "How can you know that you are not good enough, based on what criterion do you see that you are not good enough?" In the retreat that we offered at the University of California at Santa Barbara, there were many new people, and they were not used to the Buddhist way of bowing, of standing, of greeting, and they were a little bit confused as to what was the right thing to do. And my answer was that you don't have to do anything: if you are mindful, that is good enough. The problem is not to bow, or not to bow, the problem is to be mindful or not

be mindful. So if you know that you are practicing mindfulness, and mindfulness has become more of energy, a reality in your daily life, you know that you are advancing well on the path. Even if you still have many shortcomings, much un-skillfulness, if you know that you are cultivating mindfulness every day, I think that is good enough, not only for you, but for all of us.

(Three bells)

(End of talk)